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ABSTRACT

In this paper, reproduced from a speech given before the Communications Network in Philanthropy, the author uses television as a metaphor to explain the role of the family in the United States, focusing on the "Leave It to Beaver" series. An oral picture is used to discuss the changing nature of the family and divorce. First the family life of the Cleavers in "Leave It to Beaver" is described and parallels are drawn from the author's own childhood. References to other television shows portraying families are included. Contrasts are made between television families of the 1950s and 1980s. It is claimed that divorce is the social trend which has most affected families. A scenario in which Ward and June Cleaver divorce after Ward meets an accountant 10 years younger than himself is presented. Research which indicates that children of divorce suffer in relationships as adults due to effects of their parents' divorce is discussed. It is claimed that marriages seem to be in trouble more than in the past because marriage itself has changed and expectations from the marriage relationship are greater than ever. It is recommended that images of diversity in the family be promoted and that encouragement and information to those in troubled family situations be provided. (ABL)

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Ward Doesn't Live Here Anymore

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Foreword

- There are more television receivers in the United States than bathtubs or telephones.

- Youngsters spend more time watching television during their high school years than they spend doing any activity other than sleeping.

- In the average home, television viewing occupies six and seven hours per day.

The above "statistics" have become clichés as they enter the consciousness of the American public. Yet behavioral scientists studying television over the last generation have discovered that "social learning"—that is, learning about the world, how to handle social situations, and how to cope with personal problems—is "learned" from television.

All too often social scientists use jargon in trying to communicate with a larger audience. But in a talk given before the Communications Network in Philanthropy, Dr. Marion Tolbert Coleman used television as a metaphor to explain the role of the family in the United States through the "Leave It to Beaver" series. In this piece reproduced from that address, the author takes a bold risk in communicating her ideas through a present day portrait of the Cleaver family.

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WARD DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

Families are wonderful. The best stories are true ones and they usually involve children. There is just something about the day-to-day amazing things that occur in the interaction with children with which comic material simply cannot compete. Allow me to share a favorite personal example.

When my daughter was about eight years old, I was in the midst of my career as a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin. Just to make this era of our lives even more complicated, we lived in a small town about 30 miles from campus and I commuted to the university five days a week. One afternoon, as I was unloading groceries from the back of my old Volvo station wagon, I noticed my talented young daughter fingering the words "Wash Me" into the dirt on the back of my husband's car. I proceeded to lecture her on the damage that such auto abuse could do to paint jobs and she nodded that she understood, I thought. The next day, as I headed up Interstate 35, the truck drivers were noisy and obnoxious, blowing their horns and grinning leeringly. When I got to my parking lot on campus, I just happened to have to walk around the back of the car to get to class, and there in very careful letters, etched in the dirt, were the words, "DO IT TO ME TOO." You can't make up stuff this good.

Anyway, what I want to focus on here are some of the thoughts and concerns I carry around with me as a family sociologist, foundation officer, and a member of a very nice family whose members have been driving much cleaner cars in the past few years. Rather than overwhelm you with a barrage of statistics that you have probably heard before and, if you are like me, still can't seem to keep straight, I would like to address my points through oral pictures.

When Ward and June Cleaver were bringing up Wally and the Beaver, it was a world of full-time moms, wise dads, and kids whose worst offense was taking Eddie Haskell's advice. And while my own mother did not wear her apron over a shirtwaist dress with pearls as June did, she nevertheless resembled Mrs. Cleaver in many other ways. She was always there when I got home from school, usually waiting to take me to ballet lessons, choir practice, or Brownie troop meeting. There was always a homemade cake or batch of cookies to snack on. Dinner always consisted of a meat (with gravy whenever possible, which is most of the time in Texas), two vegetables (one of which was green), a salad (and I could tell when the new issue of *Good Housekeeping* arrived because the salad would be Jell-o invaded by some kind of foreign matter), bread of the dinner roll variety, and dessert. This color-coordinated feast was arranged on the table each evening promptly at 6:30 (right after Dad had finished watching the news and leafing through the evening edition of the paper).

I also knew where to find Mother on any given day of the week. Monday was laundry day. If she didn't answer the phone, I would wait a few minutes because it meant she was hanging out clothes. Tuesday was ironing day. She answered on the first ring since she put up the ironing board right next to the phone. Wednesday was her "day off," and I subconsciously knew not to get sick or forget my lunch because she was out shopping and having lunch with friends. Thursday was menu planning and grocery shopping day. And Friday still brings back negative feelings because it was cleaning day and some divine power dictated that I, as the only female child, had to help. I am pleased to say that the promise I made to myself at the age of ten, never to dust baseboards once I had my own house, has not been broken.

In sum, there was little in my own childhood to suggest that the portraits of the Andersons, the Nelsons, and the Petries I

watched weekly were not fairly accurate. While I have been blessed with a marriage that has continued to be strong after almost twenty years, longevity is about the only similarity between my family of procreation and my family of origin. There are two nice sociological terms for you. My husband and I both work, and while I was commuting to graduate school my husband was primary parent.

Indeed, my son came home from kindergarten absolutely furious one day because his teacher had told him he was wrong. She had asked Todd the difference between moms and dads and, after he described our physical traits in far more graphic detail than she probably wanted, he told her there wasn't any difference. She continued to disagree with him and finally in desperation he said, "Well, Mom cooks better than Dad, but Dad irons better." The teacher, still unconvinced, told him to go home and ask his parents for the right answer. Not a smart move on her part, as she soon found out.

Neither does my cooking or cleaning routine match my mother's. I run a short order kitchen that stays open from 6:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. and specializes in frozen pizzas, Spaghettios, and taco salads. The television forms the centerpiece for this truck stop, and the clientele ranges from none to seven or eight a day, some of whom I even know by name. Snacks come in hermetically sealed bags with elves on them, and gravies, although still much loved, have been sacrificed to the great cholesterol god.

Sunday is laundry day at our house and what doesn't appear in the middle of my bedroom floor by 1 o'clock doesn't get washed. Grocery shopping is done by the person who put the most items down on the list. My personal preference for my sustenance excursions is after "thirtysomething."

We used to have a surefire method for getting the house clean. We invited someone over for dinner. Once the kids got to be teenagers, however, we moved to an edited version of this

trick in which we invite guests over but don't feed them in the hopes that they won't need to use the bathroom, and we shut doors to all rooms inhabited by persons under voting age. In the event of hopeless destruction, we suggest meeting at a restaurant.

What I am saying in serious terms is that I have changed not only my work patterns to fit our life schedules, but the more difficut task, at least for me, is that I have had to revise my expectations of self. I can't be, and I have finally convinced myself that I don't want to be, Superwoman.

To rephrase the Oldsmobile commercial slogan, "This is not my mother's 1950s world." For better or for worse, change has come. But I'd like to return to our constant companion, the television, and its portrayals of families. In his recent book *Comic Versions: Television Comedy and American Culture*,[1] professor of American Studies David Marc analyzes the changing images television families have had over the past thirty years. He suggests that the "Father Knows Best," "Ozzie and Harriet," and "Donna Reed" shows of the 1950s portrayed America as a finished product in which there were appropriate ways for males and females to act. He sums up their underlying message as, "People are like plants. If you put them in the right soil, water them, and give them time, they will turn out to be Andersons."[2]

Several years ago, when the Nickelodeon channel began to run these old shows, I found my children watching them in the evening instead of new shows. When I asked why, my son replied, "Because they look the way families are supposed to" and my daughter chimed in, "Because nothing bad ever happens in them." Have they become the fairy tales with happy endings for children of the 1990s?

In his book, Professor Marc further suggests that, as the 1960s unfolded and the divorce rate began to rise, the image of the American family conveyed by these earlier shows didn't fit

the reality of what was occurring, but the reality was too painful to acknowledge in a situation comedy format. Think back to what images we were offered during the time. A witch as a wife, a genie in a bottle, a bunch of hillbillies in Beverly Hills, "My Mother the Car," a single mom happily driving a psychedelic bus and singing with her children, "The Brady Bunch." If any of you had a family on your block resembling any of these configurations, I'd certainly be interested in hearing about them. Not knowing what was happening to families and realizing that what we did know didn't look too promising, creators of our prime time viewing fare chose fantasy.

As the 1980s (or the Cosby era) progressed, comedy writers apparently felt that our willingness to accept alternative family structures was increasing. So, today we have Kate and Allie raising two kids together (although Allie did get a happy ending before cancellation by acquiring a new husband), "My Two Dads," and the never resolved question, "Who Is the Boss?" And while dad on ABC is helped by a brother-in-law and friend in raising his three small daughters, the widowed doctor dad on NBC is making room for his two grown daughters to move back in. By the way, I found a new phrase for these adult children who find their way back home when you could have sworn you were finally going to get your study. Sociologists are so good at coming up with terms. This process, which we in the discipline fondly refer to as the reverse empty nest syndrome, is occurring due to "incompletely launched adults." Great, huh? Can't you just hear yourself, "We are very concerned about our son, he is in danger of becoming an incompletely launched adult." Nevertheless, as we channel hop, we now have a veritable smorgasbord of family configurations to choose from (although I do note a strong, not so subtle bias toward active fathering).

So I guess you can say that we have accepted change, or at least we have become complacent about it. And sometimes I think we perform our own personal rendition of Scarlett

O'Hara and just decide that we are much better off if we don't think about things at all, at least not today.

But of all the factors that have affected families in our lifetimes, divorce is, in my thinking, one of the most far reaching and serious. The impacts of divorce affect all of us, not just the immediate family members. Our school district directory is twice as long as it was ten years ago. Not just because the district has grown, but because so many kids are crosslisted under two and even three last names due to the remarriages of their parents. My daughter continually complained during her elementary years that she had no one to play with every other weekend because all her friends had to go to their fathers' houses. And everytime my husband and I started to have a "healthy disagreement," they got scared.

Back to the television one more time—and specifically the Cleavers. If we were to recreate the Cleaver household today to reflect the late 1980s norms rather than the 1950s ones, here is what there is a very good chance we would find. I am sorry to tell you that the Cleavers are divorced. Ward met an attractive CPA ten years his junior while she was auditing his firm and fell off the fidelity wagon. Because June is over forty, there is little likelihood that she will remarry. (Only 11 percent of women in their forties remarry and only 3 percent of women in their fifties remarry.) Moreover, because baking a mean batch of brownies rates rather poorly on resumes, June is also not likely to find a job with any kind of decent salary. When she sees what is available to her, she may well find that she is actually better off on welfare. The house is on the market since the property must be divided 50/50, and there is no way that June can buy out Ward's half. Newly settled in their two bedroom apartment (luckily the boys are used to sharing a bedroom), the boys are adjusting fairly well to the new schools in this less prestigious neighborhood. Wally, as the heir apparent to "man of the house," feels pressure not only from that responsibility but also

due to the fact that his only chance for college is a scholarship since child support ends at age 18. Beaver doesn't talk much, he fantasizes a lot that Ward's new wife will leave him and he will come back to June. Ward, when he does pay child support, is usually late and can't decide who complains more harshly, June or the new wife who sees it as money they should be able to spend on their expanding family. It is not pleasant to picture the Cleavers this way, but it is a scenario that is being played out in real life on every block in this country and in probably more than one house on the block.

My greatest concerns, however, involve the children of divorce and just how long-term and how serious the impacts are on their lives. Judith Wallerstein's tremendously important research on the long term effects of divorce on family members has recently been published in a book coauthored with Sandra Blakeslee called *Second Chances*.[3] Let me share with you a small portion of her conclusions concerning the children of divorce once they reach adulthood:

> They seem propelled by despair and anxiety as they search for what they fear they will never find. They abhor cheating yet find themselves in multiple relationships that lead to cheating. They want marriage but are terrified of it. They detest divorce but end up divorced. They believe in love but expect to be betrayed. Such grave inconsistencies make life difficult. Unable to resolve these internal conflicts, they are driven to self-destructive behaviors.... Every child in our study is afraid of repeating his or her parents' failure to maintain a loving relationship.... All hold two traits in common: fear of rejection and betrayal and a lifelong vulnerability to the experience of loss.

These reactions to and outcomes of the divorce experience are not minor problems. I also found another of Wallerstein's points very troubling and it is, that, unlike other crises such as

death or illness in which family and friends offer support, when divorce occurs people stay away. No one wants to be seen as taking sides and even grandparents don't come through as one might expect. But children may be the most alone because their parents—the persons they would normally turn to for comfort—are the cause of the pain and are overwhelmed themselves. Over 90 percent of the children in Wallerstein's sample said they had no one to talk to as the divorce drama played out.

What is going on? Why do our marriages seem so much more difficult to maintain than those of our parents did? Part of the answer lies in the way that our adult life patterns have changed over this century. Women in my grandmother's cohort began child rearing soon after marriage, and many of them did not end those duties until after their husbands had died. For my contemporaries, we have the ability to choose just how long we want like to be a pair before creating a threesome, and we find ourselves at the end of parenthood with a lot of years left together. In other words, marriage itself has changed.

In addition, we expect more from the marriage relationship than ever before. We want our mate to be the best emotional, sexual, intellectual companion we could possibly have. Where earlier cohorts looked to a number of persons for intimacy and support including parents and same sex friends and siblings, we now, in our little isolated nuclear groupings, lean much more heavily on each other. Witness our growing intolerance for men of power who get caught in other than their own marriage beds, actions that the media turned a blind eye toward two decades ago while we assumed it came with the territory. We expect more now from those who promise to make a commitment.

I must confess that I am worried about the people in the families of America. I'm worried sick about them. In the past several weeks my husband and I have both had people very close to us commit suicide. Sandy left behind a husband and two children. Rod's friend had four children between the ages of

five and eleven. We have spent most of our late nights since their deaths sitting up and trying to come to terms with their actions. What made them so desperate, so lonely that they saw suicide as their only option?

I'm worried about our families, but I'm not giving up on them. I spend a good number of my waking hours studying, writing, teaching, and talking to whatever poor concerned soul will listen to me in the hope of learning and then passing on some small tidbit that may be of help.

And I still constantly see how important families are in both our daily and our more serious struggles. Just last night, my son, who has just begun his freshman year in college, called home in the middle of the night in tears. I don't guess there is anything more painful than hearing one's child in pain. He said, "Mom, I'm at the hospital. Eckert (who is his roommate) is in a coma and I am so scared." We talked for awhile and he told me the very limited information he had so far on Eckert's soccer accident. I finally said, "Honey, I feel so sorry and I wish I could be there to help you." He replied, "I know, Mom, and that is why I called you. I know you can't do anything, but I just needed to hear home. I'm better now." Just connecting with home, even by long distance, is healing. Eckert, by the way, is doing well.

As one of your peers in the communication efforts of philanthropy, I would like to believe that we all share those desires to do what we can. If you will allow me, I would like to share a couple of thoughts I have about how we can use our roles to help empower families. Empowerment has become one of my favorite words in the last few years.

First, when we focus on the subject of family, for whatever specific reason or topic, we can promote images of families that support their diversity. The Census Bureau estimates that, as we enter the next century, only 53 percent of the households of this country will be married couples. Fifteen percent will be single parent households and an incredible 32 percent will be

non-family households. Those non-family dwellings will contain people unrelated by marriage or birth or people living alone. The ethnic diversity of our nation also means that there are cultural patterns and norms not necessarily parallel to the Anglo middle-class experience. Those must be respected and reinforced. The materials we produce, in whatever medium, should portray the reality not the fantasy of contemporary American families.

Second, if we have the chance to do so, we can provide encouragement and information to those many individuals who are in troubled family situations. I believe that most people want to succeed at marriage and family. No one wants a marriage to end in bitterness or a child to end up in a drug detox program. Being a marriage partner and a parent (if we choose) are the two most important jobs we take on in our lifetimes, and they are the roles for which we receive the least amount of training in our ever-lengthening educational careers. People are hungry for information and help.

We are not ever going back to the good old days, and I for one am personally glad. Ask your parents and grandparents—those days weren't all that good. And I am also grateful that I was born in a time period that allowed me so much freedom of choice and so many choices. I hope I have made wise use of that freedom.

I began this presentation with the statement "families are wonderful." And in spite of all the comments I have made since those first three words and the fact that I admit a serious concern about them, I haven't changed my mind. My finest hours have been in the company of those connected to me by family ties. Indeed, I can't think of any lovelier way to spend the time I have on this little ball of spinning matter than with people who have to love me because I'm their daughter and have to listen to me because I'm the Mom. I am indeed privileged.

Footnotes

1. David Marc, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture.* Winchester, MA: Unwin, Hyman, Inc., January 1989.

2. "TV As Cultural Rorschach," in *Behavior Today*, edited by Ira Rosofsky. New York: Atcom, Inc. Volume 19: 46, November 14, 1988, pages 4–6.

3. Judith S. Wallerstein and Sandra Blakeslee, *Second Chances.* New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989.